A Place for the Singing of Angels
Luke 2:8-16
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I wonder if it is possible ever to understand those principal characters in the drama. Consider, for instance, how it must have been for Joseph. Nine months before, his fiancee - young Mary, had come to him stammering that she was pregnant: that she was going to have a baby! "Whose baby? How could it happen? How could you do it, Mary?" How does a man deal with that? Time has not altered the sharpness of Joseph's pain. If people found out, Mary might be accused of adultery and stoned to death. If it became public knowledge he, Joseph, would be the object of scorn and ridicule. Or he could marry her quickly and it would look as if the child were his. But that would mean a life-time of wondering and the swallowing of a very bitter pill. Joseph had a dream - and the fact that an angel of the Lord was in the dream explaining how the conception took place is not nearly so astounding to me as the fact that Joseph trusted the dream, and did marry Mary, and did take her along to Bethlehem and was a father to the child whom they called Jesus. Somehow in the intensity of that very real human anguish Joseph trusted that God was at work. Somehow in one of the most painful of situations Joseph could hear the singing of angels.

Or consider the shepherds. What did they know? Illiterate men, they may have known about David because he too was a shepherd, but I suspect their theological expertise was moderated by the more immediate realities of keeping the flock from straying and themselves warm. And somehow, in the middle of a life that was hand to mouth at best - a harsh, poor, day to day struggle with hunger - they could hear the singing of angels.

Or consider the Magi, those mystic Eastern Astronomers travelling across the desert because their calculations had indicated a King who was about to be born.

Consider what it was like for them when instead of Herod's palace they ended up in a cow barn.

Ernest Campbell has observed that "We Christians have romanticized that stable. In truth it was a place of pungent, stubborn odors, dank, depressing, disappointing". (The Protestant Hour P.20 "Of Stars and Stables")

Consider, if you can, how it must have been for the principal characters - for Joseph, Shepherds, Magi - for the young girl, giving birth to a first child 150 miles away from home - in a barn. The Xmas story is no fairy-tale fantasy. The unvarnished facts are brutally real. And yet - in the midst of that harsh reality - there was a place for the singing of Angels.

The N.T. does not take us to never-never land to begin the story - but rather makes the remarkable assertion that

In the preface to a delightful book, William Muehl, Professor at Yale Divinity School, tells the story of a Kindergarten Christmas pageant in which his young son played the part of a shepherd. The play was planned with infinite patience. Twenty little girls were deployed as angels: circles drawn on the floor told each angel where to stand - crosses guided each shepherd to the proper spot. But then disaster struck. The flowing robes of the angels covered not only the circles but the adjacent crosses as well. The young shepherds scurried about, frantically looking for their places; bumping, pushing, lifting up robes. Finally one little boy turned to the teacher standing in the wings and announced (in total exasperation) "These damned angels are fouling up the whole show. They've hidden all the crosses." (the boys were shepherds.) ~~The boy, of course, his own son.~~

Muehl observes that what his son angrily proclaimed is still a trenchant comment on the human situation. He writes: "We are indeed 'damned angels'....the cross is hidden beneath the flimsy fabric of our simple piety. Our flesh drives and afflicts us from birth to death. But we have the gall to affirm that it once sheltered the Eternal.....

There are men wise and good enough to walk with God and see visions of heaven. I have had to be content with damned angels and the facts of life." (All the Damned Angels P. 12-13)

And so comes Christmas 1974 and the facts of life 1974, in many ways just as real and earthy and depressing as they were in Bethlehem. And I wonder if you and I will hear the singing of angels this year.

Near the beginning of the Advent season I purchased a set of heavy paper nativity figures: my youngest son and I punched them out and assembled them and he set about happily playing with them. After a while he stepped back to look at the rather chaotic scene and asked, "Daddy, where's God in all that?" A very good question, I thought. A question we well might ask - where is God in the cultural phenomenon called Christmas? With all the other noises, are there really any angels singing?

It is, after all, no profound observation to state flatly that a lot, if not most, of what is going on during December has very little to do with the birth of Jesus Christ. It doesn't take a scholar to deduce that something is out of focus when the birth of one called the Prince of Peace is the occasion for presenting children with scale-model machine guns: or that the Savior's birth is the opportunity to get drunk and grab a secretary at the office party. It doesn't take a theologian to deduce that something is out of focus when God's greatest gift somehow is symbolized by a shabby Santa Claus whose inevitable first question is "have you been good?" It seems, at times, that if there are any angels singing during December, they're singing the wrong tune.

And yet, perhaps God is in it - even in the middle of that. Perhaps God can use even the absurdities - to speak to us, just as He used that disappointing scenario twenty centuries ago.

There is, first of all, a universal response to Christmas that has almost nothing overtly to do with theology ~~that is unapologetically sentimental~~. Someone has suggested that the Christmas season is a protest - a protest against dullness and sameness - a protest that there must be more for us than life ordinarily offers. A favorite line of mine from W.H.Auden has the shepherds at the manger say,

"Tonight for the first time the prison gates
Have opened. Music and sudden light
Have interrupted our routine to-night
And swept the filth of habit from our hearts
O here and now the endless journey starts"

(For the Time Being)

I submit that life, for many of us, does become a joyless routine, a succession of empty days, and that there is a universal human need to celebrate and laugh - to have our hearts lifted up and to feel that life, after all, is a rather happy condition. I think that is a deeply human need quite apart from our theological convictions. And so, almost without exception, all men pause at Christmas to express special affection, parties are planned, customs are preserved with care, the past is remembered and honored. And I'd like to hear the singing of angels in that. Rather than bristling with resentment at the secular incursion into our sacred feast, I'm inclined to be grateful that because of our Christmas, a lot of people hear the momentary singing of angels: that we help to interrupt the routine of a whole culture. I'm inclined to believe that God is not entirely unhappy at what transpires as a result of His Son's birth.

Beyond that, there is a deeper level at which Christmas touches us, and although we may not always assign the proper words to define it, it is there nevertheless.

It is the level at which Christmas makes us feel both worse and better about ourselves; the level at which Christmas seems to touch that most sensitive part of us - the heart, the spirit, and causes us to feel both sad and happy at the same time. I believe that, too, becomes the place for the singing of angels - if we will hear. Let's examine it for a moment.

Dr. Thomas Harris, in his popular best-seller several years ago, "I'm OK - You're OK" maintains that what all men need most is a feeling of being acceptable to other men - and the consequent sense of self-acceptance: in his idiom - "I'm OK". Harris and others have demonstrated how the human experience usually leaves that need unfulfilled and in many ways aggravates it. We teach our children, unintentionally and unselfconsciously to be sure, that their acceptability is based on performance. Sometimes we even verbalize it directly - "Mommy and Daddy won't love you if you're bad". That is to say, "your acceptability as a person depends, not on your intrinsic worth as a person, but on your willingness to comply with our expectations." The result, according to the psychologists, is a whole culture of men and women, unsure of their worth, and still trying desperately to comply with someone's expectations. Under those conditions life can be pretty grim - a constant battle to win, to succeed, to get ahead, to prove that "I am OK". And no prize, no pinnacle of success, is ever adequate: there is no place in the serious struggle for acceptance for the singing of angels.

And here comes Christmas, simply and eloquently telling us that we are "OK": that God loves us enough to become one of us: that He loves mothers and fathers enough to entrust His own Son to a family: that all men are acceptable to Him. Christmas says, "You are OK: you are one of the ones with whom God is pleased."

And so we respond from the depths to that music of angels even when we're not sure why.

Or let's go deeper still. Eric Erikson, a giant in developmental psychology, taught that the fundamental component in a healthy personality is something called "Basic Trust". New born infants learn it in the act of nursing - there is a world out there that can be trusted to provide for my hunger. That experience, Erikson suggested, must be repeated at each stage along the way of growth. When a child leaves home he needs to know that his widening world can be depended on to be responsive to his needs. If he has that - he or she will be a relaxed, self-confident person, able to function appropriately and responsibly.

Now, put that psychological theory in the context of theology. This has been called the age of anxiety, the decade of despair; dread and fear and a sense of hopelessness seem to characterize our age. We need "Basic Trust" in a psychological sense, and we need that same trust on a level that must be called spiritual. We need to know that there is more to reality than what comes at us through our senses: that in the middle of a world that keeps looking hopeless - there is a place for angels to sing. To be without that is to be in despair - it is to nod in pathetic agreement to the suggestion that God is dead.

No one ever expressed that philosophic dilemma more eloquently than William Shakespeare....

> "Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
> signifying nothing". (Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5 Line 19)

That's when it comes down for all men finally. If our religion is worth anything, it must tell us that we matter, that our lives count for something however modest they turn out to be: that somehow we are set in a universe that is friendly and trustworthy. One theologian put it in these words: "It is the function of religion to affirm that the source out of which life comes and into which it disappears intends the fulfillment rather than the frustration of those values we hold to be fundamental." (S. Keen, Apology for Wonder, P.204)

Hanns Lilje was a Lutheran pastor arrested by the Gestapo during World War II. His story is told in his book The Valley of the Shadow. At Christmas time in prison Lilje longed for a congregation, as only a pastor does. On Christmas Eve he was called to the office of the commandant: two others were summoned - a violinist and another man who was to be executed and who had requested the Sacrament of Communion. There, in the commandant's office the violinist played a Christmas Chorale: the pastor read the lesson, broke bread and poured wine. Later he wrote, "It was a very quiet celebration of the sacrament, full of deep confidence in God; almost palpably the wings of divine mercy hovered over us....We were prisoners, in the power of the Gestapo..... But the peace of God enfolded us." (See Best Sermons of 1955 P.114)

That is what Phillips Brooks had in mind when, in 1868, he wrote:

"O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

That, finally, is the deepest and dearest meaning of Christmas. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight". Beginning with Joseph and Mary, Shepherds and Wisemen, and continuing down through the ages, in all conditions, in all situations, in the middle of boredom, war, sickness, fear, despair, men have heard the singing of angels.

So may it be for you. Make a place for the singing of angels.

For "behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord". Amen.

Come to us, Father, in the quiet moments. Come in loud,happy moments. Come in love and joy: come in memories of Christmases past. Help us to hear - in and through it all - the singing of angels.

Amen.